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AUTHOR	McCarthy, Kevin J.
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ABSTRACT

A federal program, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employed young men during the Great Depression to help conserve natural resources by planting trees and building paths, roads, picnic areas, and parking lots in National Forests and National Parks. The men were supplied lodging at a camp, food, and one dollar a day. They could also take educational courses. Music was a very popular course, as well as a pastime. Many participants were from a broad spectrum of rural areas and came with folk music backgrounds. Most camps had glee clubs, orchestras, and bands, and the musicians performed at camp concerts and in towns. Often the towns and camps would exchange or combine musical programs. Recollections from former camp members are presented. Former CCC members have formed alumni groups and are willing to make presentations in schools about their experiences. The address of the national alumni group, which can provide contact information on local groups, is provided. Contains 22 references. (TD)

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1930s Program Can Help Schools in 1997

by

Kevin J. McCarthy
University of Colorado
College of Music

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The Civilian Conservation Corps was a Federal program from 1933 to 1942 which employed unmarried young men generally from the ages of 16 to 24 years. Over 260,000 youths were enrolled in these camps each year and in 1941, there were 322,947 enrollees (Division of Research) at an estimated cost of $280 million per year. (Lorwin) The camps were set up help the nation conserve natural resources but they also served to help the citizens during the Depression. The men were supplied lodging (which they built or in tents), food (which they cooked) and clothing (which they washed and repaired). As one enroll put it, "The CCC provided a good bunk, clothing, 3 squares a day, and pay of one dollar a day. Where else could a young man get a better deal than that during those lean dark days of the depression?" (Gilbert) The young men received $1.00 a day wages. Each month, since they had no real expenses, $25.00 was sent home to their parents and the men could Keep $5.00 a month for their needs and entertainment. However, the $5.00 was received as $2.50 in credit at the camp store and $2.50 in cash. This insured that all of the disposable income was not spent in one place.

Usually the camps were located outside of towns (in some cases

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cities) where the enrollees could work on jobs in rural areas - planting trees (they were called Roosevelt's Tree Army), creating paths and roads in National Forests, building picnic areas and parking lots in National Parks, and often performing unskilled labor tasks as requested by the local towns. In 1941, 44.1% of the enrollees were from cities and towns while 55.9% were from rural areas (Division of Research).

As a "secondary" goal, the youth could continue their education, learn employable trades, and were evaluated concerning their employment potential. In one situation, enrollees returning from one camp to Niagara Fall, New York recorded a 42 percent employment record. (Glover) Since each camp could enroll up to 290 men, the problem of recreation and entertainment for these men was a very real one. One of the most important buildings in the camp was the Recreation Hall. The enrollees in one of the "colored" camps recorded the following in their newsletter:

> Many of the boys spend their evenings gathered about the Recreation Hall piano, where they are learning and improving their dancing ability, in both ball room and stage dancing. Winston Washington is serving to some as a tutor in ball room gliding; while Ike Gibson is giving instructions in both ball room and tap dancing. (Casual Camp Courier)

The average camp schedule divided the day into the following activities: 5:30 a.m reveille, 5:45 calisthenics, 6:30 breakfast, 7:00 sick call, 7:15 police call, 7:30 work call, 12:00 noon work recall for lunch, 1:00 p.m. work call, 3:30 work recall, 5:00 assembly and retreat, 5:15 dinner, 6:00 classes and leisure time,

9:30 lights out, and 9:45 taps. (Oxley, 1940) While they would be physically tired when they returned to the camp after 8 hours of very strenuous labor, they still had social, educational and recreational needs as yet unmet. Camps would sponsor dances, show movies, teach crafts classes, perform plays and organize music groups. Music was one of the more popular recreational activities. An average of 10 percent of the enrollees participated in music courses, excluding the "common activities" of community sings, and instrumental and choral groups. In one camp had as many as 35 members studying piano. (Oxley, 1938)

Since the enrollees were drawn from all over the region, they often came with strong folk music backgrounds and played instruments ranging from accordions and guitars to ocarinas. Of course, no standardized instrumentation existed and each camp made music with the players who were stationed there. Participatory music was the rule. A pictured captioned "One of the Many CCC Bands" appears in a publication of the National Association of CCC Alumni which shows three guitar players, two violin [fiddle?] players and one mandolin player (Nolte, 1990). The enrollees at the camps would request the Director to supply music teachers so they could, in one case, "learn the fundamentals of string music." (Happy Days Jr.) According to the Director of CCC Camp Education, "Glee clubs, orchestras, and 'hillbilly' bands" were organized in most of the camps (Oxley, 1941).

The music concerts presented in each CCC camp consisted of concerts given by local townspeople, by camp members, and by traveling music groups. In addition, since many camps sponsored "radio clubs," the popular music being broadcast became an integral part of the camp life, along with the music performed in that camp.

In another style, the religious services in the local towns provided the reason to visit town and to produced music in the camps. The Reading, Kansas camp newsletter provides the following information:

> Twelve members of this Company have taken active parts in the A.M.E. Young People's Choir. They are conveyed to and from practice twice a week in the Camp Bus. Peter Andrews is in charge of the group of men from the camp. (Casual Camp Courier, September, 1935)

This same camp reports that a very good Camp Quartet was formed to sing many Negro Spirituals and Southern Melodies. The quartet, under the direction of Miss Ethel Love of Kansas University broadcast over radio station WREN at Lawrence singing such songs as Little David Play on Your Harp, Jerusalem Morning, Didn't It Rain, Li'l Liza Jane, Look Away to Heaven, Scandalize My Name, and Climbing Up the Mountain Children. (Casual Camp Courier, December, 1935)

Often, enrollees would organize and take part in a minstrel show which was written by the performers. These shows became very popular with the local townspeople. "Even in a town such as Boulder [Colorado], the local CCC camp was able to fill Macky

Auditorium [2600 seats] two nights running with a minstrel show organized by the camp boys!" (Pinto, p. 104)

The government sponsored programs of the 1930s often overlapped and supported each other. Company 3779 in Sheridan, Arkansas was visited at least twice by the Federal Theatre Project Number 1 from New Orleans, Louisiana with a minstrel show that included the traditional minstrel music. Following this performance, "Don S. Espanoza, with his Piano Accordion and Marambaphone gave several numbers of both classical and popular music." (The Hurricane, 1936, 1937)

Another example of both the musical talent available in CCC camps and of government programs supporting each other is the notation in newsletter of the camp at Pine Bluff, Arkansas which mentions that the camp band won second place in the district music contest. "The contest was held by the Music Division of the Federal Recreation Program of the W.P.A." (The Hurricane, 1938)

The local camp level of musical activity was not often recorded in the national newsletter Happy Days, but it made up a regular part of some of the individual camp newsletters. Most camps printed a newsletter as a training activity as well as a recreational activity. State and local historical libraries have kept copies of some of these publications and they prove to be valuable sources regarding the musical programs performed at the local camps. The present researcher has located some local issues in the Boulder

Historical Library (two camps in Boulder, CO), the Rocky Mountain National Park Ranger Office (four camps in Estes Park, CO), at the Federal Center in Jefferson County (two camps in Morrison, CO), and at Cleveland State University Library (three camps in the Cleveland, OH area). From such local newsletters, one can find that in Boulder Colorado, guitar, orchestra and vocal music lessons were available at the camp or in town for camp enrollees (Flagstaff News). Further one finds that in December 1936 the Ellensburg State Normal School Girls Glee Club attended the assembly at Camp Ginkgo (SP-15) in Beverly Washington and sang such popular songs as Just the Way You Looked Tonight, I'm a Lone Cowhand, Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life, When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, and It's a Sin to Tell a Lie. (Happy Days at Camp Ginkgo)

One of the citizens who was employed to direct a camp band was Chet Nolte, now of Denver, Colorado. He directed a band of 12 to 15 members at Camp Allison (SP-18) in Indianola, Iowa but often other enrollees would wander into the rehearsal and play by ear on the guitar, banjo, harmonica, ukelele, jews harp, washtub bass, or jug. The band rehearsed every night for four nights a week and played for Oyster Suppers, County Fairs, School Assemblies, and twice over the radio on station WOI in Ames and on station KRNT from the camp (Nolte, 1996a).

Another enrollee (85 years old) gives one of the motivations for joining a band. It allowed the members to leave the camp on

Saturday night to play in nearby towns. Further he writes that his "love of music has inspired me over the years to become a better instrumentalist on the guitar and also to become a vocalist. I get a lot of pleasure out of recording country western, popular music, and just about anything that comes along." (Gilbert) This enrollee has furnished a tape recording of his songs to the author. The recording is a happy mixture of storytelling and singing, which is a natural result of developing the style in the absence of other forms of entertainment like television, movies, and even radio. [play tape #1 selection here "Cindy"]. The many tape recordings sent demonstrate two very strong points: 1) personal creativity/ interpretation and story-telling are at the heart of these renditions, and 2) rhythmic freedom was the rule, except in cases where the musicians were playing for a dance. These two points are demonstrated in the two songs selected from Mr. Gilbert's tape [Get Along Home Cindy and Summertime Waltz.] This second song demonstrates a closer attendance to the meter, since it would be played when people intended to dance.

Another member of the CCCs who has sent a recording of his songs is Marion Johnson of Fort Smith, Arkansas. He writes that he remembers playing his guitar and singing songs with his good camp friend Merel McKinzie, a fiddle player. Their favorites included She'll Be Comin' Around the Mountain, You Are My Sunshine, Down in the Valley, Home Sweet Home, Stockade Blues, and Rancho Grande. "We sat around the old pot belly stove and played and sang until we

were very tired. Some [songs] I've forgotten, but I'll never forget that song, 'Boil Them Cabbage Down!'" (Johnson) A more polished performance was sent by Al Bachman from Chappaqua, New York of a song he composed about his original home state of Idaho. [Play Bachman's I Want to Go Back to Idaho].

Another alumnus of the CCC has shared a copy of songs often sung around the recreation hall at Camp NP-5, in Grottves, Virginia in 1935. The titles include: When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, Sidewalks of New York, Let Me Call You Sweetheart, My Wild Irish Rose, Down by the Old Mill Stream, In the Good Old Summertime, After the Ball, I Want a Girl, I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles, Beer Barrel Polka, Margie, Four Leaf Clover, Toot Tootsie, Daisy, In My Merry Oldsmobile, Take Me Out to the Ballgame, Moonlight Bay, Shine on Harvest Moon, You Are My Sunshine, If You Knew Susie, Give My Regards to Broadway, and I'm A Yankee Doodle Dandy. (Petro)

The band director, mentioned above, remarks further that the some of the old songs were "generally from the Civil War days--we weren't too far removed from that." And he lists Tenting on the Old Camp Ground, Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, Darling Nellie Gray, Shine on Harvest Moon, Old Kentucky Home, My Bonnie, Home on the Range, I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now? and, of course, Brother Can You Spare a Dime. (Nolte, 1996b)

CCC Company 1817 of Wewoka Oklahoma organized a quartet comprised

of a clarinet player, two guitar players, and a fiddle player. The combo played marches and popular music of the time such as My Blue Heaven, Five Foot Two, and Carolina Moon. However Alumnus Joseph Bolles (lead guitar) remembers the most requested tunes as being those that were made popular by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. Some of the songs they played were: Sitting on Top of the World, Four or Five Times, Blue River, She's Killin Me Ida Red and San Antonio Rose. (Bolles)

Finally, one of the enrollees mentioned that most of the members in the CCC with him were from "backwood farms" and played fiddles, guitars, mandolins, ukeleles, bones, washtub bass, and "drums" on a wooden typewriter box turned up on end. He worked his way from a camp in Florida to a camp in California and, after his CCC days, he attended the University of California for a degree in forestry. The one technique he remembers from the camps was the Talking Blues, where a member would strum a blues background on the guitar and tell stories in a rhythmic style. (Thaxton)

The camp newsletters and the national newsletter for the Civilian Conservation Corps mention many events dealing with music. However, the memories and recordings supplied by those who served in the CCC sixty years ago remain the clearest signal that music was used by the members of the CCC to entertain themselves and their friends after long days of physical labor. These young men built parks, cleared forests, and helped stop forest fires in every

state in the Union - then 48. They joined up with the CCC because there was no work for them in their home towns and cities. They lived through the "Great Depression" and then entered the service for the Second World War. The men who have survived have formed CCC Alumni groups all around the country. They meet monthly to share stories, meet new members from other CCC camps and to do whatever they can to keep the memories alive. AND THEY STAND READY TO MOVE INTO YOUR CLASSROOMS TO TEACH WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO LIVE DURING THE DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s.

From the National Office of the CCC Alumni one can get a list of names and address of the local Alumni Groups. Just write to them at P.O. Box 16429, St. Louis, MO 63125-0429 and they will provide the address of your local CCC Alumni group. And remember, these men are NOT a renewable resource. When they have passed on, we will have lost the opportunity to have them pass their experiences on to the next generation. So the time to contact these folks is now.

Thank you.

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